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**BYLINE:** J. Lowell Stoltzfus

**BODY:**

Over my 17 years in the Maryland legislature, I've observed four different governors experience budget challenges. William Donald Schaefer, Parris N. Glendening and Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. acted immediately when a budget problem loomed. Unfortunately, our current governor, Martin O'Malley, chose not to act during this year's General Assembly session, and simply balanced the state's budget on the \$1 billion surplus left by the Ehrlich administration. A year of delay and indecisive leadership has greatly increased the deficit and the pressure for new taxes.

During this year's session, I offered an amendment that would have balanced next year's state budget without any tax increases. It did not "cut" any appropriation from the previous year but simply restrained growth. Though several Democratic leaders in the Senate privately informed me they liked the amendment, none voted for it. The education, environmental and labor lobbies were powerful enough to alter their better judgment.

It's time now, as Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller repeatedly says, "to make a tough vote." Although he always means to vote for tax increases, it's really time for the Democrats to make a truly tough vote and restrain the growth of government.

Otherwise, government's insatiable appetite for more spending and growth will continue unabated, because that is the way the Democrats court their supporters and the way government generally responds to problems: by spending more money. Your money.

Though on many hot-button issues individual Republicans and Democrats at times may agree, Republicans generally disagree with Democrats on increasing the size and scope of government at the expense of taxpayers. Citizens pay a very large percentage of their income for a long list of taxes: federal income tax, state income tax, local income tax, sales tax, property tax, gas tax, excise tax, plus additional "fees" in numerous areas. I say, Enough already!

The decision to increase taxes is made by government officials who often have discretionary income that is not available to many - particularly to senior citizens on fixed incomes and minimum-wage earners. They are the ones who struggle mightily to make ends meet and to whom each nickel matters greatly in their effort to purchase bare necessities

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and health treatment. A 20 percent increase in the sales tax would be especially painful to them.

The public should know that the projected budget shortfall they've heard so much about will occur only if the budget grows by an unreasonable amount. The \$1.5 billion structural deficit could be reduced to as little as \$1.1 billion by a carry-over surplus from this year's budget and additional revenue exceeding projections. The Democrats want to increase the budget by \$1.3 billion - 9 percent over last year - and then claim there is a need to raise taxes. But if revenue projections hold up, the state budget could increase by \$200 million and still be balanced - without any new taxes.

It's time to rein in the growth of state government and give Maryland's citizens a much-needed and much-deserved reprieve. Here on the lower Eastern Shore and in many other areas where the average family income is less than half that of the wealthier areas of the state, we simply cannot afford more tax increases.

J. Lowell Stoltzfus represents Somerset, Wicomico and Worcester counties and is a former Republican leader of the Maryland Senate. His e-mail is [lowell.stoltzfus@senate.state.md.us](mailto:lowell.stoltzfus@senate.state.md.us)

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